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AUTHOR Shackford, Jane
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ABSTRACT

Intended as a reference source for elementary curriculum planning, this bibliography lists children's books that deal with aging and the elderly in a positive and constructive manner. Books were selected because of their emphasis on the natural acceptance of aging and the value placed on the experience and companionship offered by old people, as well as on the basis of literary integrity. Entries are divided according to age categories, ranging from preschool through twelve years of age, and each title is accompanied by a brief plot summary. (MAI)

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Jane Shackford
189 Glenwood Ave.
New London, Ct. 06320

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Understanding Aging: A Positive Approach Through Children's Literature

A new "ism" is currently demanding the attention of teachers and librarians primarily concerned with the education and literary enrichment of children. "Ageism" as the stereotyping of human behavior based on age appears along with racism and sexism as a contemporary form of social injustice. Teachers and librarians who work closely with children are challenged to find positive ways of combating ageism in the classroom and in the reading program. Thus, there is a great deal of current interest in developing curriculum guides designed to increase children's knowledge and understanding of the elderly and of the aging process as a natural part of life. For example, Maryland University's Center On Aging has developed such a curriculum guide based on the results of their study of "Children's Attitudes Toward The Elderly."[1] The study indicated that while children's attitudes toward the elderly are complex and mixed, there is a clear association of old age with negative physical attributes as well as with sexual, intellectual and financial decline. Though children assigned positive characteristics of rich, friendly, wonderful and good to old people, they also attributed to them the negative characteristics of dirty, crippled, sick, ugly and sad. In seeking an explanation for such responses, the researchers at the Center On Aging have suggested that children's literature is a primary source of stereotypic and negative attitudes toward

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the elderly.

In a further study, "Ageism in Children's Books," designed to document the pervasiveness of ageism in children's first literature, Dr. Edward Ansello, Associate Director of the Center On Aging. reported the following conclusion:

> Ageism pervades children's first literature. When older characters are always portrayed as sweet, little, or slow and are seldom depicted as capable of self-care or as active or productive, then we must acknowledge that children's literature with its present focus is a disservice to society.[2]

Such observations as these imply a serious responsibility as well as a positive opportunity for those who use children's literature as part of their class room program whether in language arts, social studies or in the library.

Finding the quantitative method of analysing children's books somewhat arbitrary, limited, and ultimately misleading, this writer undertook a survey based on a qualitative approach to the question of how the elderly are portrayed in current children's books. The survey revealed that there are many children's books available that provide positive images of the elderly with portrayals that are explicit as well as constructive and characterizations that are well-rounded and diverse. Further, in providing characterizations and situations that are truthful in their rendering of human nature and human experience these books are also a source of valuable and meaningful vicarious experiences with the elderly. Many of the current books

surveyed deal with the relationship of a young person with an elderly relative or friend. The emphasis of these books is on a natural acceptance of the physical aspects of aging, on the value of old people as a source of memories and continuity, of wisdom and experience, of companionship.

In selecting books that are to be a part of a program designed to increase children's knowledge and understanding of aging, it is important that sociological demands not obscure the need for literary quality and reading pleasure in books for children. The selection of books in the bibliography that follows was thus made on the basis of literary integity as well as sociological validity. This bibliography is offered as a helpful reference in curriculum planning with the ultimate goal of enriching the child's reading and learning experience.

Several earlier books also deserve mention: Johanna Spyri's Heidi, E.A. Ardizzone's Little Tim series, James Street's Goodby My Lady, Jeanne Lindquist's Golden Name Day, Emily Neville's It's Like This Cat.

Pre-school - Age 7

Aldridge, Josephine Haskell. A Penny And A Periwinkle. il. by Ruth Robbins. Berkeley, Calif: Parnassus Press, 1961. The setting of the story is a small fishing village off the coast of Maine. The hero is Old Seg, sturdy and self-reliant, who goes out in his boat to fish each day returning home at sunset to share his catch with Juniper, his cat. Old Seg radiates

a quiet wisdom and an appreciation of the joys of a modest but meaningful life. The illustrations are pleasing and appropriate to the simple beauty of the story.

Bartoli, Jennifer. Nonna. il. by Joan Drescher. New York: Harvey House, 1975. A little boy relates his fond and happy memories of his grandmother Nonna; Saturday gatherings of family at her house; her garden; her good cookies. The story also deals gently but realistically with Nonna's death including a description of the funeral in simple, candid terms. The convincing and appealing illustrations clearly portray Nonna as a distinct personality rather than merely an amorphous "old person."

Borack, Barbara. Grandpa. il. by Ben Shecter. New York: Harper & Row, 1967. The story begins with a warm welcome from a perky, white-headed, bespectacled Grandma and a bald, bespectacled, but quite youthful looking Grandpa who greets his little granddaughter with open arms. Marilyn then spends her day sharing a variety of activities with Grandpa which include watching him shave, listening to the radio and visiting his store. Grandma looks on with indulgent good humor. The illustrations, though a bit stereotypic in the rendering of the grandmother, are pleasing and appropriately support the story's theme of quiet companionship and affectionate sharing.

La Farge, Phyllis. Granny's Fish Story. il. by Gahan Wilson. New York: Parents Magazine Press, 1975. Julie's grandmother, who wears blue jeans and sneakers, combines wisdom with a

sense of humor and is, according to Julie, "brave and good at country things." Julie and her friend Sarah, for whom the country is a new experience, enjoy an unforgettable visit at Granny's house in the woods where they learn about the ways of the country and the beauty of a thunderstorm and are told whimsical tales of make-believe. The illustrations are lively and humorous.

Lundgren, Max. Matt's Grandfather. il. by Fibben Hald. New York: Putnam, 1972. Matt is taken to visit his 85 year old grandfather at an old people's home in Sweden. On the way, he is cautioned by his mother that "Grandfather is so old that he is almost like a baby again." "He doesn't look so old," thinks Matt as he greets his tall, thin but sturdy grandfather who has a twinkling smile upon his kindly face. A feeling of mutual warmth and respect quickly develops as these two share a walk and a delightful secret. It is clear that Matt's parents have underestimated the sustaining power of the grandfather's sense of humor and his will to live. The illustrations are appealing with a quiet sense of humor that takes the reader into its confidence.

Norton, Natalie. A Little Old Man. il. by Will Huntington. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1959. Loneliness is a feeling that can be understood by all ages. Thus the young can sympathize with this brave and hardy Little Old Man who, though he keeps very busy cleaning his house, tending his garden and fishing

each day, is very lonely. It is a family of cats that help solve his delemma. The skillful and effective illustrations contribute greatly to the enjoyment of the story.

Zolotow, Charlotte. My Grandson Lew. il. by William Pene Du Bois. New York: Harper & Row, 1974. Six year old Lew and his mother share their fond memories of Lew's grandfather. Lew recalls Grandpa's "eye-hugs," his beard that scratched when he kissed Lew, his holding Lew at night and humming to him, his carrying him on a visit to the museum so that he might see the pictures better. The warmly appealing illustrations show Grandpa as a hale and handsome gentleman, with brownish hair and a dashing beard, who is obviously active and enjoying life.

Ages 8 - 11

Cornish, Sam. Grandmother's Pictures. il. by Jeanne Johns. Lenox, Massachusetts: The Bookstore Press, 1974. Grandmother Keyes is an independent and strongly religious black woman who, though quite elderly, lives alone in spare but dignified simplicity. Nor do her grandchildren think of her as particularly old inspite of her fluffy white hair and drawn cheeks. Rather, she is for them a reassuring symbol of continuity as she shares with them her memories, her scrapbooks and her photographs. "My heart beat loudly, gladly when I came into her dark rooms," relates her young grandson, the narrator. The delicate yet realistic illustrations blend

with the poetic quality of the text to render a vision of old age that is sensitive and truthful and a portrait that is memorable.

Kleberger, Ilse. Grandmother Oma. il. by Wallace Tripp. New York: Atheneum, 1967. The five children of Herr Pieselang, a German schoolmaster, have a most remarkable grandmother who, among other things, roller skates, ice skates, hatches eggs in her bed, rescues her grandson from a bull and requests a swing for her birthday. But all is not nonsense in this amusing story for Grandmother Oma is a strict but kind disciplinarian who is as wise as she is whimsical. Fun, in a spirit of mutual caring, is her method for teaching her five motherless grandchildren "how to grow up." The humorous line drawings are cheerful and reassuring.

Krauss, James. My Great-grandfather and I. il. by Jochen Bartsch. New York: Atheneum, 1964. A young boy and his great-grandfather spend many happy and companionable hours together writing stories and nonsense rhymes which are included for the reader's pleasure. In addition, the conversations between these two are entertaining and edifying in language that is intelligent and unfailingly literate. In amusing line drawings that recall the style of Edward Lear, Great-grandfather is shown as a hardy old man whose broad grin suggests his whimsical imagination and his delight in life. An assortment of other elderly relatives also appear

in the story, providing interesting and diverse characterizations.

Krauss, James. My Great-grandfather, The Heroes and I. il. by Jochen Bartsch. New York: Atheneum, 1973. Great-grandfather, now 89, is confined to a wheel chair as he recovers from a stroke. But the two congenial companions are still creating rhymes and stories together with the same whimsical delight. The stories concern "heroes, real and imaginary, false and true." This time Great-grandfather includes in the collection a poem intended to prepare the boy, now 14, for his death, telling him that he will live on in the boy's memories and in his stories; as indeed he does in these two humorous but profound books.

Mathis, Sharon Bell. The Hundred Penny Box. il. by Leo and Diane Dillon. New York: Viking Press, 1975. This beautifully written story tells of a young black boy's devotion to his 100 year old great-aunt and his unquestioning acceptance of her ways: her stubborness, her frailty, her forgetfulness mingled with moments of penetrating clarity. Michael understands and shares Aunt Dew's identification with the hundred penny box that contains a penny and a memory for each of her birthdays. The worn old box provides many moments of happy and meaningful companionship for Michael and his great-aunt. The warm and sensitive illustrations are sympathetic, yet forthright in their representation of old age.

Age 12 and up

Branscum, Robbie. Toby, Granny and George. il. by Glen Rounds. New York: Doubleday, 1976. Thirteen year old Toby's wise and durable Arkansas Granny, by whom she has been raised, proves more than equal to the unexpected demands of a most unusual summer. Nor does Granny fail to instill in Toby a sense of gratitude for life's blessings and an awareness of nature's beauty and gifts, while at the same time teaching Toby the "hard things" of life. Glen Rounds in his skillful drawings has effectively captured the story's quality of truthfulness as well as the humor and affection that are shared by Toby and Granny.

Cawley, Winifred. Gran at Coalgate. il. by Fermin Rocher. New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1974. Jennie encounters some rather grim situations when she visits her Gran at Coalgate, a Northumberland mining town. The time is just before the mining strikes in 1926. Gran, who is the keystone of her family, handles life with calm and loving dignity, providing a sense of structure and orderliness in the midst of troubled times. The illustratrations of Gran with her strong pleasant face, her straight stance and her plain manner of dress artistically enhance the convincing portrayal of this wise and forthright woman. In her unassuming and approachable manner, how different Gran at Coalgate is from Jennie's more stylish and sophisticated Gran at Burton.

Footnotes

1 Richard K. Jantz and Carol Seefeldt, "Abstract: Children's Attitudes Toward The Elderly." (University of Maryland: Center on Aging, 1976).

2 Edward F. Ansello, "Ageism in Picture Books, Part 1: How Older People are Stereotyped," Interracial Books For Children Bulletin, 7, No.6 (1976),p.6.